

MARCH 2019

The EU Roma Framework beyond 2020 A homelessness service providers perspective

Housing issues and homelessness among Roma

The history of Roma people is marked by the persistence of discrimination, persecution and stigmatisation. These factors have a significant impact on living conditions of Roma, who are particularly affected by inadequate housing conditions – living in overcrowded accommodation, caravans or encampments - and by homelessness.

Discrimination is a major factor of Roma housing exclusion and homelessness. Prejudice and negative attitudes towards Roma people are widespread - Roma who look for accommodation to buy or rent in the public or private housing sector often experience discrimination on grounds of their ethnic origin. The 2008 Eurobarometer Survey reported that 24% of European citizens stated they would feel uncomfortable having a Roma neighbour^[1]. As highlighted by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2009^[2], sometimes local authorities deny them access to social housing through measures that are directly or indirectly discriminatory against Roma. Moreover, landlords refuse to rent housing to Roma. Pressure from non-Roma neighbours has also been reported, resulting in landlords' refusal to rent their property to somebody of Roma origin. Sometimes groups of private citizens organise campaigns against Roma and Travellers in the locality.

Without access to other forms of housing, some Roma have to build houses or makeshift accommodation without permission, often on public or private land they do not own. Lack of security of tenure is a particularly acute problem for Roma communities living in informal settlements or in rented accommodation. Those living in informal settlements are particularly vulnerable to forced evictions. There are instances of en masse forced evictions of Roma from municipal accommodation, including evictions of Roma who are regular rent payers, evictions without prior notice, evictions without genuine consultation with the affected communities and evictions involving police violence and destruction of personal property. There are many cases where authorities fail to provide alternative housing and/or adequate compensation for expropriation^[3].

Furthermore, Roma housing areas often suffer from poor access to public services, employment and schools, and lack adequate access to public utilities such as water, electricity or gas. In 2012, Eurofound reported that one of the main problems Roma face in the field of housing is the lack of access to improved forms of sanitation (such as an indoor toilet, bath or shower). According to the Eurofound report, on average, 62% of Roma did not have access to improved forms of sanitation compared to 31% of the majority population living in segregated areas^[4]. Overcrowding is also an issue with many Roma living in overcrowded conditions, with considerably less space per person than national averages, especially after relocations through forced evictions.

Data analysis shows that Roma living in substandard housing have an increased risk of poor self-reported general health and mental illness. Roma in substandard housing also have a higher risk associated with domestic accidents and drug-related problems. Lack of adequate housing can also affect health because it can be used as an excuse for discrimination in healthcare services[5].

Besides the issues faced by all Roma – both citizens of the country they reside and not – in terms of discrimination, segregation, security of tenure and inadequate housing issues, Roma who are EU citizens and decide to move to another EU Member State face additional problems that are linked to the free movement legal framework of the EU and its implementation at national level. As is the case of many mobile EU citizens, they are confronted with obstacles to the exercise of their right to free movement, notably concerning

- registration formalities
- the obtention and the retention of the worker status,
- residence exceeding three months for job seekers and self-sufficient people,
- access to social benefits and protection against unlawful expulsions[6]

As a result of these obstacles, in many European cities, mobile EU citizens, including Roma, account for a significant proportion of the homeless population and, where access to homeless services is limited to those who have a right to reside, they are highly represented among people sleeping rough[7].

Housing in the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies

In 2011, and in response to the problems faced by Roma, the European Commission adopted a communication that set-up an EU framework for national Roma integration strategies setting out 4 integration goals: access to education, employment, healthcare and housing[8]. Regarding access to housing and essential services, the EU Roma framework aimed at bridging the gap between the share of Roma with access to housing and to public utilities (such as water, electricity and gas) and that of the rest of the population. The European Commission ruled that the national Roma integration strategies had to promote non-discriminatory access to housing, including social housing. Action on housing was intended to be part of an integrated approach including education, health, social affairs, employment and security, and desegregation measures. The proposed measures are ‘soft-law’, thus not binding. The strategy set national goals for Roma integration to bridge the gap with the general population. Each Member State was then tasked with developing its own strategy or integrated set of policy measures for the inclusion of Roma populations and for using EU funds to improve their living standards[9].

A few years later, in 2017, the European Commission published a mid-term review[10]. In the field of housing, small improvements regarding access to basic amenities were recorded, such as improved access to electricity supply and a decrease of Roma living in households without tap water, toilet, shower or bathroom in several Member States. However, in several Member States, discrimination against Roma people is increasing. In the national strategies, Member States focused on promoting non-discriminatory access to social housing, yet some of the most affected countries did not report measures fighting segregation while others did not address non-discriminatory access to social housing at all. Overall, the gap between Roma and non-Roma in accessing housing remains unchanged, largely due to the absence of any significant policy measures or investment[11]. Among the challenges registered, the National

Roma Contact Points refer to the limited availability and low quality of social housing, discrimination in the housing market and segregation.

Case study: rough sleeping Roma in the City of Westminster (UK)

A few years ago, Romanian nationals had been identified as the fastest growing group of rough sleepers across Greater London and particularly within the City of Westminster. According to official data, at the end of March 2015, there were 1,388 Romanian rough sleepers. This represented 18.7% of all rough sleepers in Greater London, second only to UK nationals. The data also showed a sharp rise in the number and the percentage of Romanian rough sleepers thought to be of Roma ethnicity.

In 2017, a report prepared by the Roma Support Group on behalf of St Mungo's and Westminster City Council was published. It presented findings of research carried out with Roma migrants sleeping rough in Westminster, including interviews with 64 Roma rough sleepers over 12 street outreach visits^[12]. In addition, front line staff from homelessness services and independent consultants were interviewed. Among the main findings:

- All of the rough sleepers interviewed described their situation in Romania as one of high unemployment, poor housing conditions within predominantly Roma settlements, low levels of education and qualifications and poor access to health services all of which combined to a general lack of opportunity.
- 92% had left children back in Romania with either a partner or family members. Their intention in coming to the UK was to find employment and send money back home. Those with long term health complaints described having large debts for medical services and paying off these debts was one of the main reasons for coming to the UK.
- While interviewees were coming to the UK for the purpose of employment, in the absence of the right support and advice, it had become difficult for them to move on from rough sleeping. As a result, some had resorted to begging as an alternative source of income. Other interviewees explored other income generating options, including busking and selling flowers. Only 3 interviewees had managed to find casual employment, receiving approximately £30 per day for twelve-hour shifts. All interviewees requested support in finding employment.
- None of the interviewees had any knowledge of the UK welfare system.
- 87% of interviewees reported that they had had limited interaction with homelessness services and struggled to communicate with front-line staff.
- 86% of the homelessness professionals interviewed had very limited experience of working with Roma and had little understanding of the culture or community.
- In line with other unemployed EEA migrants, Roma rough sleepers have very restricted access to housing benefits and other welfare support. This severely limits the support and services that homelessness services in the borough can offer. In addition, the limited number of Romanian or Romanes speaking outreach workers makes communication, assessing need and signposting to services very difficult.

Homelessness is therefore significant among Roma mobile EU citizens residing in London. Although in the UK Nationals Roma Strategy reference is made to EU nationals who moved to the UK, when it comes to England no specific measure is provided concerning Roma mobile EU citizens nor any measure specifically mentions fighting homelessness as one of the priorities to ensure Roma integration^[13].

Case study: homeless Roma in Sweden

The Swedish Roma inclusion strategy, adopted in 2012, does not explicitly distinguish between Swedish Roma and Roma of other nationalities. It does, however, exclude EU citizens who have been in Sweden for a period shorter than three months. The strategy therefore ignores the fact that in practice, many Roma EU citizens have been in Sweden for much longer periods than three months. Amnesty International, in a study published in 2018, reports that, as a general rule, Roma inclusion measures on the municipal level exclude Roma who are not Swedish nationals or permanent residents^[14]. Amnesty International further explains “vulnerable EU citizens” residing in Sweden rarely comply with the criteria required to reside for longer than 3 months^[15] and are therefore presumed to stay no longer than three months. All government and most municipal policies are designed in line with this three-month model. For example, municipal homelessness policies and action plans do not include this group, due to the supposed “temporary stay” of “vulnerable EU citizens”. Amnesty International’s research shows on the contrary that many “vulnerable EU citizens” stay for much longer, despite occasional visits back to their home countries. Consequently, many spend several years in Sweden, in a social and legal limbo, deprived of social protection and support. Amnesty International research also points out that there is widespread confusion amongst municipalities and regional authorities as to what obligations they have toward “vulnerable EU citizens” under Swedish, EU and international law. In most municipalities, based on national guidelines, authorities have determined that “vulnerable EU citizens” have no right to social services such as housing, health care or education. Moreover, much of the public discourse fails to recognize the marginalization and additional barriers this group faces. Barriers to finding work, for example, leave people with little alternative but to beg for a living. Begging has been a contentious issue in the Swedish political debate in the past decade, triggered by the arrival of individuals assumed to be Roma begging in Swedish cities and towns. Two of the largest political parties campaign for a nation-wide criminalization of begging; others have advocated for local bans. These proposals do not take into account the rights of the individuals who beg, the potential for discriminatory outcomes such bans would have, and how criminalization would push affected EU citizens even further into marginalization. Nor do those who call for criminalization offer alternative ways of finding an income, ignoring the well-known fact that most people beg because they have no other means by which to support themselves and their families^[16]. Most of the people interviewed by Amnesty International said their main concern in Sweden is lack of a secure, safe and stable place to sleep, a source of enormous stress, fear and anxiety. Access to housing and shelter for “vulnerable EU citizens” in Sweden varies widely from one municipality to the other. In two small municipalities visited by Amnesty International, long-term shelter was provided, demonstrating that a rights-focused and inclusive approach is possible, but in the major urban areas this was not the case. In the big cities, many interviewees sleep in cars, under bridges, in tents made of plastic sheets or in shacks in the woods. Some spend occasional nights at a shelter, but in the big cities shelters have limits for the number of nights that people can stay and after three or five nights they are left to sleep rough again^[17].

Conclusions and topics of discussion in view of the EU Roma Framework after 2020

The EU Roma Framework has so far proved ineffective in terms of access to adequate housing for Roma. Besides challenging discrimination in housing, access to adequate, affordable and integrated housing can be a game-changer in tackling other forms of discrimination and exclusion experienced by Roma. Moreover, there are certain issues FEANTSA would like to raise for the strategy after 2020.

Which housing solutions for Roma?

When it comes to housing, the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies focuses mainly on a general principle of non-discriminatory access to housing and only includes social housing when it comes to proposing housing solutions. To effectively fight against discrimination in access to housing, policy measures need to be implemented to monitor the private rental market and provide complaint mechanisms against landlords who discriminate on the basis of ethnic reasons. As pointed out by the National Roma Contact Points, limited availability and low quality make social housing an insufficient solution. Other housing solutions should be put forward by the EU and financial resources made available. Among these solutions, the use of social rental agencies, which are non-profit housing institutions that address the housing problems of poor and vulnerable people, needs to be strengthened^[18]. We also recommend the EU take a look into other housing-led policy approaches: the City of Brno, for instance, has been using a Housing First program to house Roma families^[19], which worked with 50 families and proved to be highly successful. Czech authorities have therefore decided to scale up the approach to ten cities.

The absence of homelessness issues

The EU Roma framework sets housing as one of the priorities. However, homelessness as an issue is completely absent. Evidence shows that Roma is one of the groups that are vulnerable to homelessness. As a consequence, homelessness services have a fundamental role in providing support to Roma and need to be considered as one of the relevant stakeholders in guaranteeing the effectiveness of integration strategies. The EU should therefore make resources available so that front-line homelessness sector workers can increase their understanding about Roma, for instance through bespoke training, an information pack and a multimedia toolkit for use in outreach work. Improving delivery of homelessness services, creating the conditions for mainstreaming housing policies to include Roma living in substandard housing conditions, would increase the likelihood of social inclusion. Among other tools, a firm commitment to employ and develop Roma mediators within commissioned services would be particularly beneficial.

The absence of the EU free movement framework: the specific challenges faced by mobile EU citizens

The EU framework adopted by the Commission refers to the Roma population in general and does not take into account specific challenges that Roma face as European citizens who enjoy the right to EU free movement. In reality, as also reported by Eurocities in 2017, many cities host multiple, distinct Roma communities such as Roma who are citizens of the country where

they reside, long-term resident Roma and recently-arrived Roma from the 2004 enlargement. The situation of newly-arrived Roma is generally worse than that of Roma who are citizens of the country in which they reside^[20]. To adequately address Roma discrimination in their access to social inclusion measures and to housing, the EU Roma Framework should address the additional challenges that are linked to the EU free movement legal framework and its implementation at national level. Many issues identified over these years in the exercise of the right to free movement urgently need to be tackled. Among the obstacles that result in homelessness and housing exclusion of Roma mobile EU citizens, special attention should be paid to registration formalities, the obtention and the retention of the status of worker, residence beyond three months for job seekers and self-sufficient people, access to social benefits and protection against unlawful expulsions.

Lack of monitoring of housing exclusion among Roma

Few cities have a system in place to systematically collect data about the situation of Roma^[21]. The same is generally true for data on homelessness and housing exclusion. Overcrowding excepted, the indicators on housing proposed by the Commission in the EU Roma framework are insufficient to draw a comprehensive picture of housing problems and assess the extent of homelessness. Together with housing and homelessness services, the Commission should design new indicators and propose a monitoring mechanism to be implemented at local level in order to effectively measure the progress over the years of housing exclusion in the Member States.

The need for a better use of EU funds

As pointed out by the European Network on Roma Inclusion (EURoma Network), European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) - mainly European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) - have great potential to address the situation by focusing investments around housing needs, particularly for the most disadvantaged groups, such as Roma. However, this potential does not seem to be fully exploited and many opportunities remain untapped. Underuse of funds, delays in implementation and limited progress in the provision of adequate housing solutions are common challenges^[22].

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